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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0297
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0229
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0035
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0195
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0044
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0118
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000542

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SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL OFFICIALS TALK BANGLADESH, BORDER SECURITY

CALCUTTA 00000542 001.2 OF 002

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In light of recent political tensions in neighboring Bangladesh, post has engaged West Bengal state government officials on their views of the situation and the impact on the India-Bangladesh border. The government contacts had a general preference for the Awami League as they believe the Awami League will be more likely to crack down on Islamic fundamentalists as well as northeast Indian insurgents operating out of camps in Bangladesh. In contrast, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is viewed as accommodative of Islamic fundamentalists. The political situation has not resulted in a flight of refugees into West Bengal yet, but state security officials are concerned about an influx of Hindu refugees as the election nears and accordingly, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and district police have heightened their alert. END SUMMARY.

BORDER INTELLIGENCE CHIEF RIPS INTO BNP AND VOICES CONCERN ABOUT ARMY

¶2. (U) On November 30, the Telegraph reported that the BSF had increased the number of battalions on the border from 54 to 69 in anticipation of a mass influx of refugees from Bangladesh.

Although no exodus has been reported so far, the BSF Director-General, in an alarmist comment, told press that there were indications that people could start flocking to India as the election draws near. He said he has information that minorities (Hindus) are being threatened because they are perceived as Awami League voters. "There is tremendous pressure on them to vote for the Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP. This could push them into crossing over."

¶3. (C) Poloff met with Additional Director General of Police responsible for border intelligence Dillip Mitra on December 1 to discuss the state government's view of events in Bangladesh. Mitra also said he was worried about an influx of Hindu refugees as the election nears because the BNP and its allies "will make Hindus' lives miserable." He said Hindus would seek refuge in India until the election concludes, and although India had not yet seen a spike in immigration, he had "information" that villages in Bangladesh had already drawn up contingency plans to leave. (Note: On November 8, the Superintendent of Police in Murshidabad, a district bordering Bangladesh with a high incidence of illegal immigration, told Post that police have been placed on alert but that the district has not seen an increase in illegal immigration or a change in pattern stemming from the political turmoil in Bangladesh. End note.)

¶4. (C) Mitra expressed the oft-repeated view in West Bengal that "fundamentalist groups thrive in Bangladesh under the BNP government" as Jamaat-e-Islami and its Islamist allies are "calling the shots." He focused his concerns about the current situation on the Bangladesh Army. He claimed that both the Army and DGFI chiefs wanted to become involved because "everything is up for grabs in Bangladesh," and he warned that an army takeover would allow fundamentalists to operate with impunity, suggesting that Bangladesh's "limited democratic institutions" at least provide some checks. He encouraged the US to quietly press the army to stay out of the fray.

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HOME SECRETARY DISCUSSES TERRORISM AND STATE-CENTER COORDINATION

¶5. (C) On November 2, West Bengal Home Secretary Ray confirmed that the BSF had been placed on alert but that the border area had been calm following an initial rush by both Hindus and Muslims. On the prospect of more Hindus refugees, Ray said he did not expect an influx, although he did mention that a Hindu temple had been demolished during riots in Chittagong on October 29, an event that had not been reported in the press.

¶6. (C) Speaking about illegal immigration more broadly, Ray said that most Bangladeshi immigrants are hard working laborers, although the government has had to worry about a new element, terrorism, since September 11, 2001. He said infiltration was a concern but explained that most cases of terrorism involving infiltration from Bangladesh concern individuals of Pakistani origin. Ray added that some Indians and Bangladeshis may be supporting the Pakistanis, but he explained that the government does not have a very clear picture of the support network on the Indian side of the border and that the intelligence provided by the central government usually is not actionable. Ray said that West Bengal Chief Minister Bhattacharjee conveyed the state's concerns about the Bangladesh border to the central government during an October 28 meeting with Foreign Secretary Menon, and Ray thought that New Delhi finally was beginning to pay attention to the "East."

¶7. (C) COMMENT: So far, all is quiet on India's Eastern front. However, West Bengal government officials worry that the situation in Bangladesh could worsen, and they are particularly concerned about an influx of Hindu refugees. Accordingly, the BSF and district police have been placed on heightened alert, although officials concede that the border is very porous and if

people want to cross, they will cross. While the officials' comments seem alarmist, the results of their fears are real, with increased police and paramilitary presence on the border and greater suspicion and hardening of views toward Bangladesh, especially the BNP.JARDINE